Luīze Pastore

The ART DETECTIVES series

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The ‘Art Detectives’ series of detective stories for children invites them to explore behind-the-scenes of art and visit the adventure and mystery-filled world ‘on the other side’ of paintings. Can a work of art come alive? What would it be like to step inside paintings and experience the stories they tell? What are the mysteries that paintings hide? In this exciting series of adventure books, young detectives Theo and Button follow the trail of art, investigating the mysteries behind some of the works of the greatest Latvian painters.

Book II

THE INVISIBLE MAN

Detectives Theo and Button secretly meet at the museum of art. When Button’s dog – a fat dachshundnamed Comma – unexpectedly runs away from her and disappears, it leads to a series of adventures on the other side of the ‘Boots and Dog’ drawingby the original artist Kārlis Padegs. The greatest chase in the history of the art world then ensues, in their quest to discover what has happened to Comma, who the Invisible Man walking around in the boots is and what could be done to make the Invisible Man visible again.

**Extract**

By the time Button contacted me, I had lost all hope of ever returning to the world of paintings. For the first few days following the mysterious events on New Year’s Eve I felt as if I had fallen from the sky. I kept walking up and down Snooper Street like a kid possessed, trying to watch, as discreetly as possible, my neighbour’s house, where I had experienced the weirdest thing in my life: on New Year’s Eve, Button and I had found ourselves on the other side of a painting and had been taken backto the Riga of 1913. I had been waiting for a sign that I would be able to travel through a picture frame again ever since – back to the world that seemed to hold this mysterious power over me, making me want to return. It was the winter school holidays and the boys of Snooper Street were having snowball fights and building snow fortresses and castles. Meanwhile, I kept finding myself in front of the neighbour’s house, staring hopefully at the big windows.

‘Oi, Hypno-theo-iser, your fortress just collapsed!’ the boys would yell.

 I am actually Theo but the boys call me all sorts of names; it is Theo-sofist, when I am feeling like lounging on the couch doing nothing, or The-o-saurus, when I use long and difficult words. At that time, though, during my window-hypnothising stage, I had becomeHypno-theo-iser. Obviously, I had not told the Snooper Street boys anything about my New Year’s Eve adventures, otherwise, and I could bet my life on it, I would be little dreamy Theophile to them until my final hour.Who would believe me then?

Every night before falling sleep, going over the eventsof New Year’s Eve in my mind again, I took out a small, secret sheet of paper from under my bed, my only proof that the adventure had happened for real. The humble piece of paper bore a portrait of me drawn by the hand of the famous painter Janis Rozentāls. I made all sorts of attempts to hypnotise the paper, mumbling magic spells, screwing up my eyes and doing my absolute best to somehow find myself back at the Rozentāls’ place when I opened them again. And yet nothing happened: I stayed where I was, in Snooper Street. Eventually, I gave up and decided to put an end to this nonsense and let my life return to normal again.

And then one day I received a letter. That was an EVENT in itself; I did not normally get any letters, except the annual birthday card from Granny.
 ‘How nice to know that people still write letters!’ said Mum happilyafter finding a small white envelope with my name and surname in the letter box. There was no return address and no postage stamp or postmark, either. I opened the envelope; a small note, accurately covered with hand-written words, fell out of it:

‘HI, THEO!

SEE YOU TOMORROW AT THREE O’CLOCK AT THE MUSEUM OF ART.

P. S. DON’T TELL ANYONE!

P. P. S. I HAVE TO RESORT TO WRITING STUPID NOTES BECAUSE IT’S IMPOSSIBLE TO GET HOLD OF YOU. YOU ARE SNEAKING AROUND WITH THOSE PA-THEO-TIC BOYS ALL THE TIME.

p. p. p. s. this is from Button, in case you didn’t realise.’

The final sentence was written in tiny letters, only just squeezed into the corner of the little note.

I did not for a moment question the fact that the letter had been sent by Button: she knew where I lived. And writing sarky messages was exactly the sort of thing she would do. What worried me was something else altogether: did ‘tomorrow’ really mean the day after today? What if the small envelope had been hiding in the letter box for days and ‘tomorrow’ had actually been yesterday? Besides, which art museum did she want to meet me at – and WHY?

Despite the numerous unknowns, I cheered up immediately.

‘Good news?’ Mum asked me with false casualness, watching me from the corner of her eye. As if I did not know that she was dying from curiosity!

‘Okay news,’ I replied as coolly as I could manage. ‘The girl from the New Year’s party wants to meet...’ Just in time, I remembered Button’s request to tell no-one. ‘...she wants me to help her with her English. May I meet up with her tomorrow?’

‘With her English?!’ Mum was surprised. Obviously – taken by surprise, I had picked exactly the one subject I was not very good at. ‘Very good. I will take you.’

‘NOOO!’ I may have shouted too loud. ‘No... I will go

 on my own. Nothing special!’ I added. It’s not as if I did not do English.
It worked. She smiled ironically but did not object.

Next day I headed for the museum straight after school. I had checked out art museums in Riga on the Internet and plumped for the biggest one – the one where you could view the most paintings. I hoped it was what Button had meant in her note. Tours of art museums may be a routine experience to her; as for me, I had not taken an awful lot of interest in paintings until that weird event on New Year’s Eve.

To be on the safe side, I had come a bit early. I stayed outside at first, fidgeting around at the entrance and waiting to see Button’s mop of blazing red hair appear around the corner, rushing towards me like a flaming fire against the backdrop of the grey day. She would immediately start waving, whooping and yelling at me from afar and then start waffling about the wonderful weather – despite the fact that it was damp, chilly and foggy. However, as the events onNew Year’s Eve had shown, things were never quite what onemight expect where Button was concerned.

It was 3 o’clock on the dot now – but there was still no sign of Button. One minute past three... She was still nowhere to be seen... Two minutes past three... Surely I had screwed it up. I must have picked the wrong museum. It was quite obvious to me now that she must be waiting for me somewhere else, cursing my stupidity.

Ten minutes later, when her mop of red hair had still not appeared on the horizon and I was about to leave, a certain man with a dog caught my eye; he had been standing motionlessly just a few steps away. He was very odd-looking: his vast coat seemed to be at least ten sizes too big for him; he was wearing dark glasses; his face was covered by a giant fedora hat ... and a treacherous red lock of hair was peeking out from under the hat!

‘BUTTON! You must be crazy!’ I whistled. ‘How long have you been standing here? And where exactly are you going dressed up like this?’

‘Shh!’ she hissed. ‘Don’t make such a racket! We have to be careful.’

‘Why?’ I looked around us suspiciously.

‘We mustn’t attract too much attention,’ she said, barely moving her lips. ‘We must be inconspicuous. Unobtrusive. Unnoticeable.’

Meanwhile Button’s dog was tugging at the leash to get to me, wagging its tail and pulling her arm vigorously like a rag doll. Passers-by were starting to look back at us. An anxious lady even stopped to ask if everything was alright with me and whether ‘the person over there’ was somebody I knew (‘the person over there’ being the suspicious-looking Button).

‘Come on, Button, this is just plain silly! Everybody is looking at us,’ I protested.

‘No-one is looking at anybody,’ she said stubbornly.

‘It’s just that you don’t SEE that they are with those dark glasses! Anyway, there is nothing as suspicious-looking as someone wearing dark glasses on a grey day like this.’

Button considered this. Then she slowly took off the glasses and hid them in the pocket of her giant coat; she adjusted her black hat and, having safely hidden her face behind it, said mysteriously:
 ‘Quick, let’s disappear into the museum before anyone notices us!’

‘What about the dog?’ I objected.

‘*What* about the dog?’ she was puzzled. ‘Oh, right! Sorry. I’ll introduce you. Please meet my dog Comma. Comma, please meet my partner...’ She checked herself, cast a suspicious glance over the surroundings and then continued: ‘Meet my COMPLETELY ORDINARY friend Theo with whom I never do ANYTHING SPECIAL at all.’

I patted Comma’s head.

‘Pleased to meet you, Comma. Still, you cannot bring a dog into the museum!’ I showed her the sign on the entrance door that made it very clear that you couldn’t go inwith ice-cream, roller-skates, bicycles or dogs.

Button frowned. She obviously had not thought of that.

‘But we need him! My Comma is a scent hound. A hunter – see? He was born to FIND AND FOLLOW TRACKS! He will be an EXCELLENT assistant to detectives... like us!’

‘Detectives? What detectives? What are you talking about?!’

‘Art detectives,’ she whispered impatiently.

I had a better look at Button’s funny attire. Firstly, she was dressed as a DETECTIVE; secondly, she had brought a HOUND; thirdly, we were meeting in front of an ART museum... This could onlymean one thing: Button was armed to the teeth so we could return to the world of paintings and get involved in solving new art mysteries –like real detectives!

 ‘You’re not very quick for a detective,’ Button said softly through her teeth. ‘This time around, we have to be prepared to deal with anything. ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE in that world. Just think about it: what if we have to search for someone again? Who would be better at it than my Comma?’

 So I checked out her famous hound: the well-fed shiny dachshund did not resemble a keen hunter at all; in fact, he looked more like a hot-dog sausage on four legs.

‘Nonsense! He has INSTINCTS! At home, he runs after every flying slipper and hides them in the most impossible places, and...’ Having covered her dog with kisses, she suddenly froze. ‘Listen, I’ve got a plan!’

Then she gave her fat dachshund one final kiss, opened her incredibly vast coat and put Comma in the huge inner pocket so that not even the tip of his tail was visible. Then she closed her coat again and said with some satisfaction:

‘Done! No-one will notice athing. Can we go in now?’
 I hesitated – partly because I was angry that I had not thought of it myself. The idea was so simple that anybody could have come up with it.

‘Of course,’ I replied coolly. ‘Let’s go.’

The plan would have worked out just fine, had it not been for that fat Comma. There was a crowd of tourists at the ticket office; Button and I joined the long queue. It was noisy, hot and boring in the lobby, and Comma started to protest about the whole thing: he was whining, fidgeting and wriggling in the inside pocket of Button’s coat. Noticing the rather suspicious movements in Button’s chest area, a well-tanned tourist stared at us; unfazed, Button smiled innocently and curtsied.

‘My heart is pounding,’ she chirped in a piping voice. ‘It is ever so EXCITING here at the museum!’

 The foreign tourist did not understand a word of what she said; what her chirping did achieve was wake up Comma’s dormant INSTINCTS(the same ones advertised earlier by Button): the feisty dachshund decided that a cheeping prey had appeared somewhere outside the pocket of the coat and started tumbling around even more vigorously; quicker than Button could say ‘dachshund’, he rolled out of her pocket like a well-stuffed sausage and headed directly for the crowdof tourists.

‘Now we’re done for!’ we were tacken aback.

Some of the tourists stepped back; others, not noticing anything, were still flocking around the box office with Comma weaving his way between their legs. Cautiously, I tried to approach the dachshund. By now Comma had climbed up the first steps at the entrance, huffing and puffing. I was tiptoeing nearer and nearer to him and was about to reach out and catch him by the tail when suddenly...

‘Young man! Where are you going?’ said the lady in the ticket office. Her voice was stern and low and startled me like a little bird on a tree branch. I jumped and immediately blushed as red as a beetroot.

‘We do not admit fare-dodgers! Kindly produce your tickets!’ She stared hard at me from behind the ticket office window like an owl from a hollow tree.

‘N-n-no, it’s not that I...’ I tried to explain. I looked at Comma from the corner of my eye: he had gotten as far as the final step of the flight of stairs; on the second floor landing, his heavy rear end swerved and he skidded extravagantly on the slippery museum floor, then regained his balance and scurried away, disappearing into the depths of the museum galleries.

‘CAN I HELP YOU?’ the ticket office lady repeated tartly.

‘T-t-two, please,’ I stuttered,frightened.

After a deep sigh intended for me and a particularly expressive glance at Button’s attire, having noticed everything else about us thatseemed suspicious (namely a fat Comma going AWOL), the lady produced two entrance tickets.

‘Excellent,’ I muttered when we had finally got past the ticket control. ‘The worst opening in the history of detective stories!’

‘Comma, be a good boy and come back! Comma? Yoo-hoo!’ Button called softly while inconspicuously checking every nook and cranny of the museum;but the dachshund was nowhere to be found. The museum was so huge that a hundred fat Commas could have hidden there and we still would not have been able to find them. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack.

‘It would not be a problem to a REAL detective,’ Button gave me her most scathing look that would have burnt a button-sized hole in my forehead... if only her attention had not been drawn by something else.

‘Is that possible?’ she cried and rushed over to a painting. ‘Look, Theo, it’s Madam Elli!’

We were in the largest gallery of the museum. There were loads and loads of paintings hanging on the walls and a few modest benches for enjoying art while taking a breather.

I recognised her from afar and the description on the little plaque simply confirmed my memories: ‘Portrait of Elli Rozentāls. 1906’. She looked exactly the way we recalled her: dressed in a long white dress, so calm and full of dignity. There were lots of portraits of other people on the wall; the signs under the pictures said that they had been painted by the great Janis Rozentāls himself. In some of them I recognised people whom we had met atRozentāls’ New Year’s party. In the paintings, they looked so life-like that it felt as if they were about to step out of the pictures and throw a new party right here, at the museum.

And then there was Janis Rozentāls himself, looking on at his own paintings with pride: hanging on the side wall, there was his self-portrait, and Button immediately glued herself to the painting.

‘How lovely,’ she sighed excitedly. ‘I remember Janis JUST like that...’

‘Ha! Girls...’ I sneered while focusing on Rozentāls’ self-portrait with yet more determination. No-one would believe it if Button and I told them that we had known the man in the picture personally. The elegant painter seemed to wink at me from the painting.

‘Listen,’ I could contain myself no longer. ‘Perhaps we could try...’

‘...and revisit Janis Rozentāls?!’ Button did not need any encouragement. She adjusted her wide-brimmed hat, wrapped herself in her detective’s overcoat and carefully checked that we were not being watched. Then we exchanged glances. We knew a magic chant that had helped us travel through a picture frame before.

‘Could you kindly leave me alone...’ Button opened our magic chant and I completed it:

‘And let you talk to the wall out of sheer boredom?’

We held our breath and solemnly waited for an unforgettable return to the art world.
The next thing I knew, I was... stuck to the wall! I saw all the paintings by Rozentāls in front of me and wanted to find Button who had disappeared from sight – but I just could not move. It felt as if I had been trapped inside a box! I had not expected anything like that.
 ‘Button! Where did you go?!’

‘I’m over here!’ she called out from somewhere at the other end of the hall.

I cast another look over the empty room.

‘But I don’t see you anywhere!’

‘I am stuck in some sort of a corner!’ she complained. ‘All I see is a dusty corner. Eww, there is a spider here!’ she yelled.

Two tourists entered the hall. They ran their eyes over the paintings and approached me. I froze (actually, I was already frozen in any case since it was impossible for me to move). The tourists looked me in the eye, then, shaking their heads, examined my hair, ears and mouth.

‘Rosenthal!’ said one to the other. The latter nodded thoughtfully; after a short while, they moved on to the next painting.

‘B-button...’ I whispered softly. ‘Do you hear me?’

‘Yes, what is it?’

She sounded exhausted from the effort of trying to get out of her trap.

‘I think I just have been transformed into a Rozentāls’ self-portrait,’ I said.

I was rolling my eyes – the only part of my body that I could move – vigorously, trying to catch a glimpse of myself as if from outside. I could not see my feet, no matter how hard I tried, but I did notice that I HAD A MOUSTACHE now!

‘Button, I REALLY am JANIS ROZENTĀLS!’

I puffed up formidably and imagined myself twitching my small funny moustache.

‘Come and take a look at me!’ I invited her proudly. She should see me being Rozentāls!

‘I can’t,’ Button said in a low, disappointed voice. ‘Which painting am I?’

I tried to find a picture in the farthest corner of the room. There was only Rozentāls’ wife Elli sitting with her back to me, facing the corner; she was wearing a big black hat, almost like the one Button had on today. It was obvious that Button had turned into a portrait of Elli Rozentāls.

‘The spider is coming closer!’ Button shrieked. ‘I want to get out of here!’

We repeated the magic words and immediately came back to the museum hall: Theo and Button as themselves, alive and kicking.

‘Ugh!’ Button shivered. ‘Sitting in a corner and watching spiders for a hundred years! I wouldn’t like to be a portrait.’

I was dispirited. This kind of return to the world of painting was not exactly what I had been dreaming of all this time. I wanted to visit a real, LIVING world, not pose in front of visitors like an ancient museum exhibit.

‘Perhaps what we need is to find a painting where people are acting naturally. Get it? Not posing deliberately – where they have actuallybeen CAUGHT in the middle of something happening?’ I had an idea.

Button cast a quick glance over the works of art.

‘”The Jubilant Children”,’ she read the title of a painting. ‘Look! Let’s try this one.’

The painting showed two children, a boy and a girl, against a background of spring-like blue sky; merrily singing and hollering, they were running around in a meadow, as if caught in the middle of a game.

‘But they are almost naked!’ I wrinkled my nose. They looked as if they had just returned from a swim in a lake.

 ‘So what’s the big deal? You shouldn’t be embarrassed in front of an artist!’

‘Yeah, yeah, it’s the same as with a doctor,’ I replied testily. She had said the same thing at the Rozentāls’ house when we were looking at pictures of half-naked people.

‘Could you kindly leave me alone?’ Button was fidgeting with excitement.

‘And let you talk to the wall out of sheer boredom?’ I muttered, although I was none too pleased with her choice of painting.

We were immediately dazzled by the bright sunlight; we felt dizzy from the fragrance-filled spring air. We found ourselves in the middle of a meadow. Behind us, there was just a grassy green knoll and the vault of the brilliant blue sky. In front of us, we saw everything that wastaking place in the museum hall; it was like watching the telly. Except now the hall looked as if it had been painted with light brush strokes: as if it was the museum that had transformed into a painting instead of us being inside a picture!

Thank goodness, we were able to move around freely inside this painting. Intoxicated by the fresh spring air, we romped and frolicked around in the meadow. Button climbed on top of a mound and burst into a happy song, but when brushed-in figures of people suddenly appeared in the frame of the painting, Button’s song halted mid-note and we froze in whatever position the moment had found us: myself – almost in the middle of a leap and Button – with her mouth wide open. The people looked at us but, not finding anything suspicious about the whole thing, moved on to the next picture. As soon as they disappeared from the frame, we laughed so hard our sides almost burst and Button rolled down the grassy mound. It was so much more fun than sitting stiffly inside a portrait.

Then we caught sight of something that had us glued to the picture frame like two frogs: from the right corner, a black nose suddenly appeared inside the frame, followed by a long and shiny muzzle and two large floppy ears; finally, the whole of the fat dachshund had slipped into the museum room like a long sausage.

‘Comma, come here!’ Buttoncalled out, greatly relieved.

Happily wagging his tail, Comma sniffed at the corners where Button and I had been standing only a moment ago; unable to find us, however, he scuttled in confusion to the adjoining hall.

‘Let’s catch him!’ Button cried.

We uttered the magic words and returned to the other side of the painting. We were just in time to catch a glimpse of Comma’s long tail and hear the clicking noise of his clawson the slippery parquet, then a few hollow thuds as Comma’s heavy body hit something with great force and finally – some spirited barking from the furthest hall, followed by a sudden and VERY SUSPICIOUS silence. We ran in that direction. We rushed through the whole succession of halls as fast as we could; however, Comma was no longer there. How was that possible? He was here only a moment ago!

‘This is not a sports ground,’ huffing and puffing, a museum usher finally caught up with us. ‘What’s the great rush? The art is not going anywhere!’

If only she knew that it was not art we were after...

‘Of course it is,’ Button replied innocently, as if she were reading my mind.

‘We are looking for my dachshund. We lost him; do you have any idea where he has got to?’

Hell’s bells! Button was clearly not thinking what she was saying.

“Dachshund, dachshund, hmm...’ the usher mused to herself. ‘I seem to remember seeing something like that.’

Now we were in trouble! The dachshund had been noticed and Button had voluntarily admitted our mischief. I already saw us banished from the museum in shame...

The usher approached a group of tourists which seemed to have detached itself from a painting like a huge, living organism.

‘Over here!’ she pointed happily. ‘Surely you must have meant THIS work of art.’

The piece that revealed itself to us was a small drawing, a little picture that had been shyly hiding behind the wall of tourists only moment ago. When I saw it, my heart did a somersault. I felt like sitting down for a moment to pull myself together; since there were no chairsanywhere near me, I sat down right there on the floor.

‘Isn’t it nice that children also appreciate art,’ the museum usher was delighted at the sight of me gaping at the drawing.

I could not believe my own eyes. It was Comma inside the picture!